

COLLECTED POEMS, 1968-2016

By

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Quadrennial Poems

The seven poems that follow constitute a connected series. The original idea was that I would write a poem every four years, in the summer of the Presidential election year (or, if you prefer, the Summer Olympics). These poems were to reflect both my inner state and the state of public affairs. I wrote the first of these in 1968, just after I graduated from college and another four years later. Then, alas, I got distracted and did not return to the project until 2000. I can only speculate about what I might have written about the Bicentennial year of 1976 or the irony of Ronald Reagan being President in the Orwellian year of 1984.

The things in the public sphere that I did write about include the assassinations and ghetto riots of the late 1960s, the degeneration of the counterculture in the early 1970s, the millennial nonsense (such as the Y2K bug), the 911 terrorist attacks and their aftermath (including the Iraq War), the San Diego County wildfires of 2003, the onset of the 2008 recession, and America's growing political polarization. As for my personal life and inner state, I began with the alienation and sense of aimlessness of a recent graduate in the Vietnam era (1968 was the year of the original version of the movie *The Graduate*, and some of us thought we were living it), continued with the disappointment of coming back to the only place I was ever homesick for and finding it charged, and then jumped forward to the concerns of middle age: watching other people age (or even die), having children grow up and leave home, struggling with job pressures and burnout, and dealing with fear. I retired from my job in 2009, so the two most recent have to do with retirement and its adjustments, including the pleasures of birding, the experience of living across the street from a construction project, and what it felt like to turn seventy. And along the way, there have been meditations on time, truth, change, violence, redemption, and immortality.

These poems are connected to one another in other ways than their dual theme of inner and outer states. The later ones (2000 to 2016) are connected by the metaphor of a boat on a stream: what is happening to the boat and the stream set the mood for the poem. Also, the later ones sometimes refer to the earlier ones: for instance, the 2016 poem alludes to the 1968 poem. Finally, all of them except the first are at least in part in the form of prayers.

America the Beautiful, Revisited Summer 1968

I.

railroad tracks garbage cans sooty Saturday night street
going somewhere in the darkness.

Headlights, taillights – it really doesn't matter
back and forth 'cause we're just drivin':
And the neon sign aflashin' - can't you see the dollar sign?

go-go!
buy-buy!
fun – flicker, flicker....

There's a stoplight: tell me Mr. McLuhan,
What's that pretty little stoplight mean?
You don't say?...well, that's groovy!...
But now tell me what do I do if I don't like it?

II.

I saw a picture in a magazine
Detroit, Michigan July, 1967 –
And it looked a lot like this
Only there was soldiers and a fire –
(Black face bored in the mercury-vapor lamp:
Sitting on a garbage can outside a bar –
Tell me Mr. Black Man, what you got on your mind?
Tell me why do you pick your teeth with a switchblade knife?)

III.

Prostitute, miniskirt; dark legs sweeping up
Hips lazy rolling in the headlights beside a fireplug
Bends over showing skin –
Tells a fat bald White Man in a taxicab
Where he can find the action:
All this pink-lit by a go-go club sign
On a sidewalk that smells like day-old beer cans.

IV.

Starting, starting: gasoline –
We're always going –
Always doing –
Always going nowhere, doing nothing....
(Police car in a side street

Motor running, lights out
Knows there's trouble brewing –
Wonder if the policeman knows where the action is...?)

V.

Brick-bats tear gas sirens screaming flashing lights
Sound of nightstick hitting human flesh
Screams and curses running feet
The popcorn sound of gunfire in the night:
America the Beautiful is getting raped,
And all we do is sit and gawk and gape
Because it hurts us it hurts us it hurts us –
It scares us and it's tearing out our hearts –
And we love it we love it we love it –
We're tired of lies and peace and self-control –
So let it all hang out!

VI.

The world is burning burning burning
The Senator is dead, hurrah!
Hooray! Hooray! they're hurting Uncle Sam
They're hanging Father Time
They're burning Santa Claus –
Mommy, I want to see him die!
Oh, sitting in the garbage can
Waiting for the garbage man:
I see 'em burn an' loot an' kill
And death rides in an Oldsmobile
And it's none for think, it's all for feel –
I see the flames, I feel the heat
All the dogs are howling for bloody meat –
And then it's gone, there's nothing left
But smoking boards and broken glass:
And you wonder how it all went so fast
But the bloodless street lamp still burns on
And you know it's like that when it's gone:
It's only junk when you've finished wrecking it.

VII.

And then you think perhaps it's dawn
But you like the dark and you hate the morn,
And you know it's crazy but still you've learned:
You like to see it all hang out.

You like to see it raped and burnt
And you know you liked it all along
And when you're crazy, you know there's nothing to be done
– You just kinda hope you'll wake up some morning
and it won't be there.

Starting, starting: gasoline;
We're always going –
Always doing –
Always going nowhere, doing nothing

Eschatos/Logos
Summer 1972

I.

I am more alone than ever now –
It's been a creeping thing:
One by one, the intimacies of my life
Have crumbled into uncomprehending silence.
The meanings:
First they change, and then they are no more.
The moving patterns of our lives dissolve –
We realign at cost of constant effort,
I am tired of the struggle for a piece of solid ground.
Drifting through the cities,
Through the airports and the bus stations,
Through the wreckage of my life,
Through the artifacts of ancient friendships –
Through it all I move,
Shadowed by the sadness.
It seeps through my reunions.
Yes, I think the game is up.

II.

New York:
Paranoid City –
Fear in the alleys,
Anxiety in the Avenues
Suspicion on the cross-town streets!
In Connecticut they are afraid;
And in New Jersey they fear
The Stranger.
They believe he cannot abide
The green leaves and the sunlight,
But still he stalks them in their dens and family rooms:
"Oh, do not go to the City at night, my child,
Avoid the exit ramp!
Beware the huddling buildings and the dark spaces between,
For *there* be demons!"

III.

In New York you can buy anything:
There is an agent for every purpose:

An agent of apartments,
An agent of roommates,
An agent of dinner partners,
An agent of husbands and wives –
Very soon,
I expect an agent of ideologies.
The idea is logical:
A computerized service
To find a suitable philosophy
For a modest fee.
O city of the Stranger,
City of no common ground
Are you not home to us all
In a world of diminishing grounds?
The broken require the Broker.

IV.

Bus stations in a sweat:
Angry crowds,
Trying to escape in fever-eyed panic,
Push and shove in muggy desperation.
The line forms at the rear
As the system falls apart.
But the rear is everywhere;
The war has no front.

V.

Yes, in Asia,
Death without hope;
Destruction without further purpose.
A sulking vengeance:
To retire to a safe distance and waste
And in the process, waste our last excuse.
"Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord.
"I will repay:
For every bomb you drop,
I will require a measure of your spirit;
For every body you blast,
I will require an equal measure of your soul.
Do not think you can escape:
I am not mocked.
You have sown,
And soon you shall reap.

There will be no honorable end
To your dishonorable enterprise!"

VI.

Madness,
Mere madness!
We awake and awake,
And yet it does not cease.
I no longer believe in the purification by fire –
I have seen the end of anger:
Mobile,
Hostile,
We drift along the streets
An loiter in the shadows,
Alert and wary,
Each of us poised to strike:
A perimeter of deadly defense,
Surrounding a burned out village.
Where *did* all the flowers go?
No one picked them.
No one uprooted them.
They withered because we had no tears
With which to water them.
We, too, are children of the beast.

VII.

Love Field
In contradiction to itself:
Polite suspicion in the red-eyed Texas sun.
The Wild West Wind
Isn't the only advocate of anarchy in the heavens.
Delta demands that I be myself,
Showing existence permits in duplicate,
And conducts a futile search.
Haight Street –
Intrinsic coherence among the ruins.
I think I no longer believe
In the Promised Land –
The Kingdom is within you.

VIII.

In the interim
Between the temporary expedient

And the provisional measure,
I seem to be.
But to be is not to be –
Hamlet's question's empty.
What have I become?
Actor of a thousand roles
Upon a thousand stages,
And all the permutations; I cannot comprehend
The combinations of role and stage.
I try to hide,
Invisible in the shadows,
Changing with the weather;
To drift upon the periphery
Of scenes I didn't write
On nights without number.
One by one the lights go out,
The dumbshow starts:
Our words slide by each other
And never touch,
Each one the player and the bard
In a never-ending farce.
And what of dying empire?
What of compulsion thickened and become corrupt?
And what of the screaming sadness?
And what of the sulking badness?
And what of the mocking madness?
I did not wish it thus,
I did not wish it thus,
I did not wish it thus.
Even so, Lord, come quickly.

A Thousand Years Are As a Day

Summer 2000

I.

The show goes on despite millennial panics:
The endless round of war and shaking ground.
Yet still we wait, expecting your appearance
To pull us out before we finally drown,
Adrift within some eddy of the flood.
Becalmed by daily habit,
The slow circle of routine.
Your signs we fail to credit,
Unsure of what they mean,
Confused by the wisdom of the crowd.

II.

Extraordinary times breed ordinary men,
Lulling us on the brink of amazement.
The buzz and hum of conventional folly
Confuse the brain and dull the ear,
So that soft of head and hard of heart,
We spout nonsense and self-righteousness.
Some say that we broke the code,
But the message remains a mystery
To those who have nothing to say,
Struck dumb by the privacy of truth.

III.

The witness takes the stand and gives his testimony,
The residue of life neither experienced nor perceived,
Reconstructed from fragments of memory,
And inferred from confusion and desire:
A story overflowing with meaning and continuity
Constructed from mere chaos,
The aggregate of pain cemented by passion,
And overshadowed by the certainty of sin.

IV.

Time slowly changes ideals into obesity;
Ease dulls the pain of poetry and we fall silent.
Our years pass away and we grow serious:
Oppressed by counselors,

Hounded by promises,
Filling our freedom with busyness,
Dragging our commitments behind us,
Clanking
All the way to dusty death
Are you still the resurrection and the life,
As alarm clocks proclaim the Sabbath?

V.

The voice of the pager cries in the wilderness!
Cell phones shout forth in the sanctuary!
The fish is taken by the net,
The fly by the web.
Our lives are filled with lies and rumors and trivia,
Swept by common hopes and fears and gossip about strangers,
Preyed upon by microbes immaterial,
Intimate with what we cannot see or touch,
We are lost in the solitude of universal presence.
O Lord, be present to us when we call,
And save us from things that go beep in the night.

VI.

It is the season of the spider in the summer of the snake:
You will know the cost of power in the day the pavements bake.
You will trap the wealth of nations in the swarming of the poor.
You will hook the politician as he rises to the lure.
And there's fire along the ridge line and there's ash across the moon,
And there's weeping in the garden as we watch it wilt at noon,
Hardened by the dryness of indifference.

VII.

And bottomless pits of misery yawn
Cry out "We're lost! We can't go on!"
And then go back to sleep.
And when that sleep at last has come
And fatal news has left us dumb,
There's neither hope nor fear nor grief,
And scarcely any pity.
I love my neighbor, Lord, but still
I do not love my neighbor's will
The cheek that's turned, the second mile
At last exact revenge:
The inner Pit Bull snarls and snaps,

Lunging for the psychic scraps,
Choking on the acid of thwarted self importance.
O Lord, who will save me from my pride?

VIII.

So now I know the game is done –
No strength to fight, no place to run,
Trapped between grace and hellfire.
I cling to mercy every day,
And so endure the long delay,
The sentence of suspense that flesh is heir to.
The millennial midnight passed us by.
There were no portents in the sky:
No sudden dark nor falling airplanes –
Even the computers didn't crash.
And so, Lord, in your wisdom,
You did not come
In history
With fire,
But daily to the hearts of those who believe.

Fire and Lies
Summer 2004

Prologue

No planes rained from the sky
To mark the turning of the age,
But biding their time,
Came straight in on wings of malice
To sever the mooring lines
And nudge the boat
Back into the fatal stream.

In every great disaster there is a moment of clarity
When the way lies open between hate and love,
Truth and delusion,
Intelligence and inarticulate emotion.
In pain and confusion,
We choose the delusion
That soothes indignation,
Inflicting pain in expectation
That fear will freeze our foes.
We thus lose hold of truth
And enter a world of paranoid fancy,
Imagining conspiracies amongst the ill-assorted
And fearsome weapons
So well hidden
They were never really there.
Then, striking at the shadows
And the furtive shifting forms
We pre-empt contingent futures
And unleash the reign of fire.
To those so inclined to fight
War has a thousand pretexts
But never any reason.

The day of wrath dawns dark
To clouds that are not clouds,
Dropping snow that is not snow.
Later, fog that is no fog gathers
And the wind drives the ash and grit
Into every gap and cranny:
The world is burning,
And we are downwind.
The air is filled with soot and rumors

As the flame funnels down
The strip of empty land
Pointed like a spear at the city's heart:
First the brush, then the houses,
And later, when the wind shifts,
The tall trees in the mountains.
And everywhere amidst the ruin
We see the cruel caprice of doomsday:
One is taken, and another left behind.

Memorial Day

Step by weary step,
The generations trudge into the wilderness
To a mountain top
Where mist obscures the world.
Through scrub and oak and bramble,
Passing rattlesnakes and swarms of flies,
To where the cloud pours through the gap,
Condenses on bud and blade,
And soaks them to the waist.
High up on the canyon rim,
Down across the creek,
Pushing up the disused road to the saddle,
Coming finally to the place
Where the young pines re-seed the burn.
It is sobering to contemplate
The ashes of thousand year old trees,
A reminder of our final end:
They who had outlived so much
Undone in a moment
By a fatal combination of wind and fire.
It is reassuring to contemplate their progeny
Springing up heedless from their cones
To boldly face a world
Of fire and rot and bark beetle.
And so it is with us -
Except that we remember.
Higher still they climb
To where the tall trees grow unburned as yet,
And so on by obscure trail
To the ultimate pile of rock
Where the world ends in fog.
Father and son alone on a mountain top -
Not Abraham and Isaac on Moriah -
For here there is no test of trust,

Only hunger, a long road home,
And the wisdom of an old firefighter
That this too must burn.
Coming down the mountainside,
The father stumbles and lags behind
As the son forges on relentlessly.
The torch has passed.

So what one generation learns in pain
The next forgets,
And then must learn again.

Independence Day

The shadow of the waving flag
Blots out the rising sun.
The final victory is proclaimed
Where nothing has been won.
At night along the darkened arc
The fireworks flash and flare,
To celebrate subversive dreams
That are no longer there.

In the park, smoke rises from the barbecue.
We are come together in the humid heat
To celebrate independence with a child who is not coming home.
We have traveled long, weary miles through desolation
To let go of what was already gone
And yet can never really leave:
From the time she was a toddler in diapers
Eating orange peel on the patio,
She was herself, and wholly beyond our will.
It is not good for parents or nations
To seek too much control
Of what will be wild and free.
And so it is with sorrow we behold
The brave upstart republic
Reduced to a comic-opera empire -
All strut and fret and insult -
Unable to pacify even one small country,
Locked in a circle of self-glorification and delusion,
Bleeding from a thousand fatal wounds,
Lashing out in guilty frustration to torment and humiliate -
While its proconsuls flee before their time,
Bewildered by terror and division.
Love of country,

Like love of children,
Is not conditioned on good behavior
And does not preclude confrontation:
We have been unworthy of ourselves,
And that must change.

But still, with proud unyielding necks,
We turn our backs and sneer,
And hide behind self-righteous rants
The sneaking, secret fear.
And with our zeal postpone the day
When we can hail as one
The colors that can never blend
Until they learn to run.

Reunion

The glories of the garden fade:
The zucchini's riot is quelled;
The tomatoes yield their fruit
And go their way.
The time draws near for a strange journey
To the scene of our adolescence.
Out of the airport,
Through the rain,
Into the suite -
Into the blare of music and conversation;
The shock of the familiar name
No longer fitting the form or face.
Memory arcs and sputters
Across the gap of forty years
As we behold with dismay
The cinders of our youthful lust
Grown matronly.
Yet for the space of a night and day,
We live suspended in a time
That is both then and now,
Where proud grandmas boogie the night away,
Trying to reenact what it felt like
To be eighteen.
But after the after-dinner speech,
After the talk of things that were or might have been,
After the recollections of juvenile mischief
Grown mythological in the retelling,
After the photos taken and the photos exchanged,
Comes the journey home:

Into the morning sun,
Past church parking lots filled with cars,
Through the overcast,
Back to an ever-changing world that is forever changed.

But fact and word
Are never clear or plain -
The truth that's past
Can never be regained.

Labor Day

Day after dreary day
Begins in darkness
And ends in defeat.
Between the alarm clock's jeer
And the slumping in the chair
Lies an endless waste of effort.
I have known the weariness of work
That touches not the essential -
Neither meat nor house nor garment -
But seeks the truth of the trivial
And mastery of the mundane.
I have felt the weight of one more thing to do
Wearing down desire in the name of duty.
I have known a growing incapacity for pleasure -
A sense that there is no such thing as innocent enjoyment -
That at the bottom,
Everything I truly wish to do
Is some sort of secret crime or dereliction.
I have suffered the pain of human digits stiffened and twisted
In pursuit of bits of knowledge
Buried in the great digital mother lode.
I have watched the erosion of hope
In a world of diminishing returns
And uncertain justice.
I have tasted both victory and defeat
Within the little circles of our shared delusions of significance.
And through it all, I have learned two things:
The supreme difficulty
Of discovering the truth of anything however small
In the midst of complications and approximations,
And the certainty that we were not designed to idle:
Rust is the same as fire, only slower.

But still, between the thought and deed,

There looms a dreadful void.
Aghast, I stand upon the brink
Dismayed, but still employed.

Epilogue

In times of fire and lies,
After the shock and disbelief,
After the rage,
After the grief,
After the desolation
When even the secret places
Of the mind lie in ruins,
There comes a resignation:
What's burned is ash
And lies become familiar.
From all such peace, O Lord, preserve us!
O you who are the Truth,
Draw near to us who can never know truth,
But only You.
Forgive us the little chattering certainties
With which we paper over
The great gulf of ignorance and doubt.
Comfort us in the loss of all
That can be lost through time and chance and conflagration.
The Father of Lies stokes his fires -
So stoke You yours:
His to murder and defile,
Yours to revive and purify.
O cleanse us of our chaff and dross,
And fill us with your life,
Assured that in the flood of time,
He who is not resurrected
Is surely superseded.

The End is Fear
Summer 2008

I.

The ashes settle,
The fire smolders and then dies,
The stream grows sluggish,
As it gathers in a slowly-warming pool.
The frogs croak - then all is still,
And we sit, numb and weary,
As the priests and prophets of the age,
In their lab-coat vestments,
Rise to pronounce our doom:
To sit sweltering in the dark
In a world devoid of wonder;
To contemplate our folly:
How we squandered our legacy
Of dinosaur grease and ancient ooze,
And walked in heedless self-indulgence
Down the short and fatal arc
From nasty, brutish, and short
To short, brutish, and nasty -
A state from which there's no return.
And partially persuaded by the portents
Of a decade of disaster -
Fire, storm, flood, and tsunami;
Earthquakes, wars, and rumors;
Scandals, bubbles, and price spikes -
We despair but go on in the same old way.
Politicians cry change, change!
But there is no change.

II.

Above our heads, the walls all reel
As down the Street the piggies squeal.
Each tries to drive a better deal
As all go down where none comes back -
With perks and bonuses intact.

III.

(The chatter of piccolos,
The jangle of tamborines,
Above the long, slow dirge of the cellos.)

IV.

And on the vase the glaze is crazed
With cracks that leave the mind amazed.
And chemicals delude us still
Or tell the truth - we cannot tell.
Intelligence that cannot find
Within itself the least design:
Comprehending all - but not itself:
Denying its traces;
Reasoning that a universe
Vast and intricate
Beyond imagination
Must therefore
Have emerged from chaos -
Unimagined.

V.

But you, O Lord, are from everlasting.
You created us in love
And hide us in the inner chambers of your heart.
Consider your creation and be merciful:
Turn folly into blessing
As you did in ancient days,
Taking on our flesh and sorrow -
Yet without sin.
Let us see your glory
Once again.

VI.

Around the turn into the last lap,
Running harder than ever -
Lungs burning,
Muscles beyond pain,
Sweat blurring my eyes,
Far past the joy of effort,
Far past everything except the obsession
To reach a vanishing finish line.
There is but one final finish line
And just beyond it, One who rose
To show that life is permanent,
Not death.
All plans are lies,

Present fantasies of a future
That is nowhere, and never.
And will it seem rest
To wrestle with the claims
Of contending angels?

VII.

Adrift in a nation of cowards,
A people afraid to be just,
Afraid to be known,
Afraid to live in peace,
Afraid to seek truth,
Afraid to believe,
Afraid to change,
Afraid to stay as they are,
Afraid to give away what they cannot keep -
And suddenly,
Afraid even to spend or lend.

VIII.

So here I lie
In the anxious hour before the dawn
Anticipating alarms,
Waiting for the light,
Waiting to be swept away
To some unknown end -
Afraid.
Fear is everywhere and always -
Give me courage, Lord -
O Lord, give me courage!

Decay and Renewal
Summer 2012

Invocation

And now the stream runs dry;
The boat lies useless in the sand,
Bleaching in the sun.
On the bank, the weeds wilt
And the hot wind rearranges dust
On the trees' gray leaves.
The grass withers and its flower falls –
Even the grasshopper lies limp.
All flesh fails, both men and nations,
And only you, O God, are from everlasting to everlasting.
Come now and breathe on us:
Revive us and transform us.

Hymn

For everything is changed,
Yet stays the same:
One year of “What next?”
Two of “What now?”
And now one of what is:
A program of false hope,
A survey for the novice,
And a long, slow slog
Through muddled worldly thought.
And in the midst of all, your gift:
An avian *annus mirabilis*
Full of unsuspected hawks and falcons,
Of fearless warblers lounging at my feet.

O You who made the feathered wing
And taught the tern to fly,
Oh, teach us now your praise to sing
And lift our spirits high!

O You who made the claw and beak
And taught the finch to feed,
Oh, teach us now your gifts to seek –
Sustain us in our need!

O You who made the kestrel's hue
And taught the thrush to hide,

Oh, teach us how you raise anew
The life that's crucified!

Communion

Elsewhere winter is the season of death,
But here it is summer: the time of desolation,
The days of fire and boredom,
When hot wind blows from the east
And the sun scorches.
Fleeing through the cactus and sand
We seek the cool of mountain meadows
And the comfort of our kin:
The ease of long familiarity,
Of shared memories and jokes,
And the hope of immortality
Both of genes and of tradition.
But when another generation
Begins to doubt or to forget
Will that be oblivion?
Will we cease to exist?
But oh, our Elder Brother –
The sacrifice that bought our peace –
You who died and are alive,
Lend us your eternal now
And make us one, for we live in you!

Offering

Great saints ought never to marry;
Not, as is supposed,
Because it would blunt the edge of their sanctity –
For holiness is always snatched
Out of the interstices of mundane lives –
But to spare their would-be mates
From being unequally yoked
With those who must needs neglect them.
Saints utter wisdom in the tongues of men and angels;
They possess deep knowledge and fathom profound mysteries;
They donate community property to charities;
And burn the candles of their bodies at both ends.
They are remembered with awe and gratitude.
Those who live with them are not so:
They must simply love
Without hope of glory or reward
Until the resurrection.

Yet there is need of saints,
For the poor are always with us;
They never cry, "Enough!"
Our alms just sink like pebbles in the sea,
And justice is discussed but never done.
O You who are always enough,
Sustain your saints and multiply the gift!

Sermon

All pass away – both men and nations!
All fail – both men and nations!
All fall – both men and nations!
All fade away – both nations and men!
Alas! Alas! The evil days have come,
And we gaze with longing
On the days of our strength:
Days when life consumed us,
Tomorrow was before us,
And we strove heedlessly to conquer,
Moving, breathing,
Our minds undisturbed by our hearts.

In the land
The odor of decay is in the air:
We are sick and cannot get well;
We are weak and cannot recover our strength.
We choke on the dregs of our greatness;
The roof rots and the wall gives way.
We are paralyzed,
Sitting in a circle on the ground
Hurling fragments of abuse at one another
As if the faults of others made us good.
With no heed nor hope for tomorrow,
We clutch and grasp,
Determined that what we think is ours
Will not be wrenched away
Except from our cold, dead hands.
Self seeking, self serving,
Persisting in our sin
Until we are empty shells
With no selves left to seek or serve.

But oh, amidst our crumbling shells
Can our spirits ever be renewed?
Can a green shoot rise from the rubble?

Can a seed, split and destroyed,
Its fragments rotting,
Give birth to a strong young tree?

When hope has died
And despair's not fully born
There comes an empty time,
A Mohave of the mind,
Filled with apathy, cynicism, and doubt,
Dry and level,
Stretching to conclusions dimly guessed.
But when we've been jilted by the world –
The flesh grows dull, the eye sees nothing to desire,
And pride tastes bitter in the mouth –
Oh, then the watch is neglected on our walls;
So let your Spirit come to us:
The wind and then the fire
And presently Your still, small voice
To counsel patience while we wait for rain.
O You who were, and are, and are to come,
Rain down on us your resurrection!

Benediction

Eternal life is ever present in the mind,
The screen on which the passing shadows dance:
We live within the fragment of a glance,
A guess before, our memory behind.
Non-being baffles us. We look askance
At rumors of blank nothing at the end –
For life is all that we can comprehend –
Rejecting bounds to living time's expanse.
For even on this earth our lives extend
Beyond our deaths: our wills are not confined
To here and now: we know we loose and bind
Beyond ourselves with all we give and spend.
And so an old man sweats to plant a tree
Whose fruit he knows he'll never live to see.

And may Your peace rest upon us all!

Three Score and Ten
Summer 2016

Flash Flood

A ribbon of cracked clay
Winds across the desert.
Within it lies the stream,
Now a trickle, now a puddle,
Now only damp mud.
Is it near its end in the alkali dust of some desert sink?
Ah – but what is this?
Suddenly the stream begins to flow,
To rise, to swirl and foam,
Threatening to burst its banks!
Where does this water come from
In the midst of endless drought,
The desert sand and the glaring sun?
Is it a flash flood,
Pouring from some hidden valley
In the golden hills?
If we could find the valley, could we find the gold?
Even now?
With the scriptural span run
And the game in overtime?

Mind and Time

Time –
It is strange, is it not?
Out in the world, time plods in a line
Always now, always between past and whatever,
And has been forever, time out of mind.
In our minds, time moves at random
From remembered past to imagined future,
Darting about,
The essence of our lives and selves.
All time is present in the mind.

Construction Project

And you, O Lord?
For you both kinds of time are just the same.
You know the end from the beginning;
You speak of things that are not

As if they were;
And then you speak and they are.
We, in imitation, demolish and construct,
Forever living between conception and completion,
Amidst the dust and the rubble and the noise,
With streets blocked and sidewalks closed,
Watching the weeds grow thick in vacant lots,
Enduring the chaos as time plods on,
Living in hope, gripped by the obsession
Of plans imagined and projected,
Fiercely longing for the moment of consummation,
Be it of bird lists or books or bricks and mortar.
And then the moment comes – it is done!
First we feel relief and then empty exhaustion
As the job is finished and must be cleaned up after –
It is over but it is not over;
It is never over
Only You have ever finished anything.
And we?
We just move on
As what we built begins to crumble
And the weeds grow.

Entropy

All things crumble and decay,
Be they institutions, communities or structures.
They decay and crumble,
Be they desires, ideals, or morals:
Habits degrade, bodies waste away,
Both flesh and grass wither, and their flowers fall,
And nothing endures but You and your word.

We are all born perfect, or so our parents think,
Bright shining from your mint –
But damaged by life, we barely function.
There is great grief in the marring of perfection;
There is great pain in love –
Is love better than perfection?
For death casts its shadow across the living:
The watches and wakes all take their toll,
Exhausting those that remain behind.
And what of those that go?
That is in your hands: we only know that we are diminished by their departure.

And even your people, O Lord –

Your church –
That rock lodged in the throat of death
But never swallowed –
Fractured from of old,
Your one way shattered,
Splintered and split again,
Abounding in types and templates:
Mystics, monks, and martyrs,
The muscular and the militant,
The missionaries:
They all haunt us, spreading confusion and dismay,
As our complication distracts us from your simplicity.

Weeds

And still the weeds grow rank,
Pushing up through every crack in the ruins,
Covering the construction sites and piles of rubble.
We fade and pass away but they remain;
We kill them but they keep coming back.

A sour mood descends upon the land,
Like the aftertaste of vomit.
Full of suspicion and contempt,
We succumb to the wisdom of con men and clowns;
Swept by winds of fear,
Lost in an acrid fog of anger –
We grope, strangers to one another
In a time that seems utterly strange.
And still the weeds grow:
From Watts to Ferguson,
From Vietnam to Iraq,
The story's still the same:
Still sitting in the garbage can,
Still waiting for the garbage man
To haul the mess away;
Still hoping we'll wake up one day
And it won't be there;
Still hoping for the miracle of peace
With hope beyond belief.

Out of the Shallows

And where is faith?
I pose and pretend,
Skipping across life's surface,

Never noticing the deep beneath,
Exulting in mere effort,
Rejoicing in the strength of age,
Pursuing with delight the objects of my folly,
Clinging to the rope as time runs out,
Puzzled and alone,
Abandoned by the times,
Tasting both the bitter and the sweet.
The bitter either kills or cures;
The sweet just makes me fat.
And blinded by my flesh,
I stumble and grope
At the intersection of your reality and mine,
Unable to comprehend or imagine
The powers and authorities
Or the forces of good and evil in the heavenly realms.
Adrift in this shabby everyday world,
The companion of whores and thieves and hypocrites,
I cannot understand the part I play
In his double drama of rebellion and redemption.
O my Lord, give me your eyes to see what you see,
To know your love and glory,
To feel your power in the tips of my fingers,
To grasp what it is to belong to your body,
To the company of those who fill you up,
As you fill everything both within and without,
As you enfold it in your embrace.
O my God, touch our ruins!
Erect us in your presence!
O Lord, have mercy on us all!

Miscellaneous Poems

Oh, Sailors on the Midnight Sea

Oh, sailors on the midnight sea
Who run before the storm,
Abandon now the sinking ship,
Or screaming you may drown!
But still you salt-caked pillars
All stand gazing at the wind
At the lands of desolation
You had thought to leave behind:

A dusty, rainless season
Where the sun stoops down to wither;
And human voices sob above the sound
Of lonely footsteps crunching
Down the God-deserted pavement
Of a God-deserting time.

Oh, you who with one hand hold the rope
While I still cling with two!
Who am I to criticize?
Who am I to say, "You talk too much"?

Only – no ever yet got courage
Boldly to leap out on that sea of God
By too finely considering the matter.

Time passes
Our lives wash away....
But truth is not a specimen
To be pinioned to a board.
Soft now –
Behold a vision:
Good and evil,
Siamese twins,
Forever locked in one another's eyes!

In the perplexity of silence
Beyond that paradox
All truth lies.

Consider Compost

(A composition on decomposition)

Consider compost -

This pile of table scraps, grass clippings, and last year's leaves
That molders in the corner of my garden.
Deep down in its fragrant heart, it is dark and warm and nutritious
A banquet for bugs and grubs.

They eat and excrete,

Making the rich dark soil that nourishes the cannibal plants,
Their roots thrust deep into the rotten remains of their ancestors.

They stand there in the cool June gloom
With leaves dark green and prosperous,
Striving lustily for light and space,
Choking out the weeds and early herbs
That grew too close to them:

Lunker zucchini lurking in the shadows,

Fragrant basil and jalapeños

Tomato vines climbing and twisting about their poles,

Full of hard, green new-set fruit

Destined to hang red and heavy

In the early August sun.

Post-modernists, all of them,

Deconstructing and recombining their legacy of loam

Until the time comes for them to join it.

And so, sunlight is imprisoned in living leaves that die and decay

And decaying, pass through the guts of worms

To become the darkness of the soil.

Then, rising with the sap to fill the fruit,

This light-become-darkness nourishes the thought of man

And at last becomes pure spirit.

This is a profound mystery.

Philosophers may ask why God ordained it thus

That we humans derive such pleasure from rottenness.

This is folly.

To question the ways of the Almighty is futile:

The world is as it is, and unbelief won't cure it.

I sink my teeth deep into the tender flesh of a ripe tomato.

The sticky red juice runs down my beard and stains it -

And I give thanks.

Flag Etiquette

Flags are not polite –
Indeed,
They are truly rude,
Demanding precedence,
Thrusting their fellow flags aside,
Striving for the top position on the pole
And the place of honor on the podium,
And heaping shame and guilt on their caretakers
Should they be sullied by something short
Of national policy or diplomatic duplicity.